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Agonistic Games: Multiperspective and Unsettling Games for a Social Change

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Abstract

Historical narratives of conflict typically revolve around heroes and villains or perpetrators and victims. However, this dichotomy of events and people into good and evil greatly reduces the extent to which the past can be analysed, explained, and understood. To truly understand the actions that lead to conflict, one must appreciate the dense network of relationships between social agents, each with their own personal motivations and ideals. A contemporary political viewpoint capturing this multiperspectivity is that of Agonism. Focusing on the characters and events, Agonism emphasises the socio-cultural interactions and relationships between all agents involved including bystanders and, crucially, perpetrators. We discuss two 'Games for a Social Change' that we have developed to promote an Agonistic view: *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag* '43. We describe the games themselves, and the framework of memory studies that informs our work.

Author Keywords

Agonism, Serious Games for Social Change, war, play

Introduction

Games can engage players in a variety of ways beyond entertainment [4]. For example, games have been examined for their social impact [13] and their ability to

change attitudes positively [11]. Such games are typically termed 'Serious Games for a Social Change'. For example, games such as *Attentet 1942*¹, *This War of Mine*², and *Papers Please*³ each use character role-play to encourage players to reflect on complex socio-political topics.

A new way of stimulating reflection on socio-political topics is Agonism. Agonism takes a multi-perspective view on the motivations of all social agents including victims, bystanders and importantly, perpetrators. Within the field of Memory Studies, Agonism is proposed as an alternative to antagonistic and cosmopolitan views that typically polarise narratives (i.e. 'US' and 'THEM') or focus heavily on the perspectives of victims.

In this paper, we present agonistic games as a tool to stimulate reflection and understanding. In particular, we describe the design of two agonistic games: *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag '43*. Both games present perspectives on war from multiple social agents and force players to make unsettling decisions. We've developed our games as part of "Krieg. Macht. Sinn." (i.e. "War. Power. Meaning."); a temporary exhibition hosted by the Ruhr Museum in Essen. The exhibition attempts to expose multiple perspectives on the wars of the 20th Century to facilitate a reflection on the meaning of war, and ultimately reinforce social cohesion in Europe which is currently fraying in the EU as nationalist and xenophobic movements are on the rise and fuelling ethnic tensions [8].

Agonism and Memory

Memory Studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that examines individual and collective phenomena, using

the past as a tool to understand the present in the knowledge that memory informs culture and identity. Within Memory Studies, Agonism refers to a way of remembering that is an alternative to the established cosmopolitan and antagonistic views [2]. In the antagonistic view, the past is remembered as a moral struggle between two sides; one of which ('US') is presented as good and the other ('THEM') as evil. The view is often linked to nationalistic discourse equating 'US' to the national community and 'THEM' to foreigners and migrants. This mode of collective memory fuels political passions, including strong emotions such as hatred and contempt for each sides opposition (the 'OTHER').

The cosmopolitan view by contrast has tried to counter and defuse nationalistic discourse, which is seen as the main cause of war and conflict. Instead it focuses on the perspectives of victims, their plight and suffering, as a way of reaching out to the 'OTHER' [5]. In doing so, it has promoted the principles of democracy, dialogue, and human rights by soliciting feelings of compassion for those who suffer, and shunning political passions in favour of rational deliberation. The cosmopolitan view considers good and evil in moral, abstract terms rather than creating a bisection to describe distinct communities ('US' and 'THEM'), and thus de-humanises perpetrators irrespective of the community in which they identify or belong.

Agonism refers specifically to the relationship between political adversaries who respect one another as adversaries, share the same symbolic space, and respect the democratic rules established as conditions for the struggle for hegemony [7]. It is a view of remembering that associates the past with socio-political struggles for power and collective passions, but also brings to light the social and structural inequalities and historical contexts

¹<http://attentat1942.com/>

²<http://www.thiswarofmine.com/>

³<http://www.papersplea.se/>

that underpin such struggles. Like the cosmopolitan view, Agonism is multi-perspectivist and reflective, but differs by offering insights into multiple social agents, not just victims but also bystanders, betrayers and above all, perpetrators. Furthermore, perpetrators are re-humanised, through an understanding of the socio-political context that led to their perpetrating action and behaviour.

Agonism and Games

We are driven by the following question: how can Agonism be explored, promoted, and pursued via games? We submit that games can incorporate agonistic elements that promote reflection upon the past and offer multiple perspectives, *including* those of perpetrators. Such elements may manifest in the game's context (how it is positioned socio-politically and culturally), audiovisual design, narrative (the factual or fictional stories that are told) and gameplay (the decisions that players make).

We situate Agonistic Games (AGs) as a subset of 'Serious Games for a Social Change' given their ability to change the attitude or behaviour of the player through gameplay [1]. These games force players to face challenges and make difficult choices that they would not have to in their regular life [3, 13]. AGs maintain qualities of play, progression and rule-making while - in keeping with 'Games for a Social Change' - encouraging 'new ways of seeing the world' [9]. Such intentions can be achieved by drawing on two key attributes of games:

1. Factual storytelling. Games can create realistic historical contexts in which players become immersed, therefore helping them identify with people living in unfamiliar historical and socio-political environments. Narratives may also be based on the experiences of real people and memory

of the past to assist player identification with characters.

2. Interactivity. Players are able to assume various roles, and impact the narrative of the experience by making choices.

The delineation between AGs and the wider field of 'Serious Games for a Social Change' occurs in the intention of the former to draw on multiple perspectives to promote reflection on the past to impact the present.

Several games exist that engage the socio-political context we are examining in this paper (the experience of war) via gameplay elements that could be considered agonistic. A notable example is *Attentet 1942* - a 2017 title developed by Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences that describes the experience of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakian territory from the viewpoints of both survivors and perpetrators. Although this game is not designed to be agonistic, we nevertheless identify that it has agonistic elements. Historical narratives and personal memory are used to promote multiperspectivity and defend difficult decisions made by people who, in the cosmopolitan view, would likely be labelled as perpetrators [10]. *Attentet 1942* helps confirm that games are an effective means of stimulating reflection on historical events, given their ability to expose players through role-play to the complex system of variables that underpin them [6].

By drawing on games like *Attentet 1942* as well as literature on Agonism, we have devised the following tenets of how Agonism may be conveyed within a game:

- T1** Frame narratives as decisions and consequences that are *unsettling* for the player.

- T2** Promote reflection by presenting *multiple perspectives* on a scenario. This should be achieved through gameplay that forces the player to engage with multiple socio-political perspectives.
- T3** Establish a *resonating context*. The games need to be relevant for the people playing them to help them connect with the memories and experiences on an empathetic level.

Designing an Agonistic Game

To develop our AGs, we worked in collaboration with a team of experts in memory studies. They were part of the initial design sessions and helped shape how each game's choices would fit the theme of Agonism. We designed 2 games as part of our project: *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag '43* (See [Figure 1](#)).

Endless Blitz is a 2 player game set during a fictional blitz over a suburban region. The game is inspired by a 5 month campaign led by the allied forces to bomb the Ruhr Area, a German stronghold during the second world war. One player takes the role of a bomber while the other acts as an evacuation officer. Their responsibilities seem clear-cut at first, yet this dissipates as the game progresses and each is forced to make unsettling decisions that question whether society would view them as heroes or perpetrators. For instance, the bomber may choose to disregard orders, and the evacuation officer may favour protecting friends over more vital personnel such as nurses. The game is played synchronously across a single screen, where both players face off against one another. Gameplay takes place across 4 phases, which each phase requiring player action via touch-based interaction. In the first phase, the bomber learns about the available payload while the evacuation officer studies the attributes of

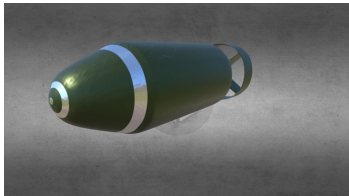
civilians. The second phase is strategic; the bomber receives information regarding her targets, while the evacuation officer learns of the location of shelters. In phase 3, the bomber chooses her payload based on the information from phase 2, while the evacuation officer selects people that will be in her charge. In phase 4, the bomber flies over the city dropping bombs on targets that have been identified in the mission brief as high-value (e.g. those that cut off power or supplies), while the evacuation officer hurriedly allocates groups of individuals to appropriately sized shelters. Once phase 4 completes, each player's score is presented to them, and gameplay loops over again from phase 1. Ultimately there is no winner; the gameplay is designed to symbolise the endless nature of war.

In *Umschlag '43*, up to 4 players assume the role of a person awaiting deportation at *Umschlagplatz*⁴. Players are briefed initially about their character, which range from a corrupt Jewish ghetto officer to a Catholic man with questionable connections to the Nazi party, and told that their trustworthiness and personal value are being judged. An NPC (Non-Player Character) name Marek⁵ then comes forward to tell characters that he is there to recruit, and therefore save deportees. He however reveals that he can only save one person. *Umschlag '43* proceeds with players sharing information about their character's formative years and role in the war; choosing either to share true statements, false statements (lies) or damming intelligence on other characters that they are familiar with. Trustworthiness and personal value metrics are attached to each statement. For example, Philip is selling

⁴The loading point used by Nazi Germany to assemble Jews in ghettos for transport to death camps.

⁵We based this game on Marek Edelman, a leader of the Jewish Ghetto uprising in Warsaw

Figure 1: Screenshots from *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag '43*. The top image depicts an historically accurate bomb used in *Endless Blitz* while the bottom image depicts a choice imposed on a player in *Umschlag '43*.



Your: Klaudia



I hid my relationship to ensure my partner's safety

My real name is not Klaudia, I use this to protect my identity

Philip supports his family by selling out Jewish informants to Nazis

intelligence to the Nazis (low trustworthiness) but has connections and valuable information on Axis plans (high personal value). Although tempting to choose high value statements, players must be careful not to invalidate their stories as they proceed to select further, previously unseen statements, as this may arouse the suspicion of Marek. In terms of gameplay mechanics, exchanges of information are done so in rounds and are committed via a single tap on a tablet device. This stripped down style of interaction is intended to ensure that the game is fast paced and loaded with a sense of urgency. Following two rounds of information exchange, Marek asks all characters who they think *shouldn't* be saved. Players are then given only 5 seconds to make their choice. The game concludes with Marek revealing his new recruit, along with a text-based break down of all the truths, lies and defamations traded during the game.

Our goal was to design *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag '43* to engage the core tenets listed above. With respect to **T1**, we designed our games as a series of explicit and implicit choices where outcomes are not immediately clear to the player. Each choice has a consequence, forcing her to reflect upon her actions once a decision is made. In *Endless Blitz*, the choices the bomber and evacuation officer make during the game (e.g. whether to follow bombing orders; to prioritize the safety of certain civilians over others) have unsettling consequences at the end of the game. In *Umschlag '43*, all players are fighting for a single chance to be saved, even though they are all aware of their own individual flaws or crimes and may suspect that other characters may be more valuable to Marek.

Both games provide holistic perspectives on their respective scenarios through interactions with playable game characters and NPCs, taking **T2** into account. In

Endless Blitz, bombers receive orders from their commanding officer who provides unique motivations for carrying out the mission. Players therefore must sympathise with the role of the WW2 bomber who may feel mandated to follow orders yet struggle with the moral implications of their actions. The evacuation officer character presents a different perspective on the scenario. Players here experience the tension felt by people who undertook this role, where quick decisions had to be made to prioritise either the protection one's own friends and family or society more broadly. In *Umschlag '43*, players assume roles of characters that are each from a different socio-cultural background. Through communication, interaction, and reflection players gain an understanding of life during conflict and how a person's context shapes their decisions. This helps provide personal insight into why such (sometimes unsettling) decisions were made.

Finally, with respect to **T3**, both games take their own approach to context and personal connection. As *Endless Blitz* is to be exhibited in the Ruhr Museum in Essen, we establish a local context and strong relationship with the past by taking the Battle of the Ruhr as inspiration for the game's setting. In *Umschlag '43*, the game is set in a well recognized historical place (Umschlagplatz), with context that resonates strongly with German communities, including those living in the Ruhr. This context is further developed through role-play with identifiable characters.

Conclusion

AGs promote social cohesion by forcing players to make unsettling choices, empathizing with others and thus changing their attitude or behavior through gameplay. They promote reflection by presenting multiple perspectives on topics that are relevant for players. In line with this, we have positioned AGs within the field of

'Serious Games for a Social Change' [1, 13, 12], and described the design of two AGs for installation at the Ruhr Museum in Essen: *Endless Blitz* and *Umschlag* '43.

We hope our games encourage reflection within the CHI Play community and beyond on themes of war and Agonism, and instigate behaviour changes in players. As social cohesion is fraying across the EU and North America, we submit that there is a growing need for interventions that establish a collective understanding on global issues. Future work will evaluate the success of our games in their social impact and how they promote social cohesion.

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